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Interpretation and Preservation of Civil War Sites: Two Case Studies from West Kentucky

The recent surge in interest in the American Civil War, which still seems to be rising, has expanded efforts, both governmental and private, to preserve battlefields and increase the number of visitors to those battlefields. In a number of states these efforts have worked with existing programs to preserve green spaces; in others they have helped increase awareness of the value of green and open spaces. They have also fueled the preservation and interpretation of a wide variety of historic sites. The combination provides many opportunities for public historians, opportunities we have used at Murray State University while developing a public history emphasis in our Master's program. Rather than discuss what I see as the causes of the current surge of interest in the Civil War and where I think it may go, a topic for another day perhaps, I'd like to discuss two of our projects that deal with specific Civil War sites in Kentucky—Columbus-Belmont State Park in far western Hickman County and Sacramento in McLean County.

Columbus Belmont State Park

Columbus, Kentucky, was an important port on the Mississippi River and the northern terminus of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad when the Civil War began. At the beginning of September 1861, Confederate General Leonidas Polk occupied Columbus and began erecting fortifications to defend the Mississippi River. The site became known as the "Gibraltar of the West." Polk's move prompted Union General U.S. Grant to occupy Paducah and Smithland to protect Federal control of the Ohio River and its tributaries, the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. These movements ended the "neutrality" of Kentucky, setting in motion the battle for control of the western rivers that

would be pivotal in the outcome of the war.

In November 1861, Grant led his troops against a Confederate camp at Belmont, Missouri—directly across the river from Columbus. He was forced to withdraw after overrunning the Confederate camp when the guns from Columbus opened fire on his troops. He returned to Paducah and in late January 1862 began his campaign against Forts Henry and Donelson, which eventually led to Union control of the Mississippi Valley. It proved to be a keystone of the Union victory.

When Fort Donelson fell in early February 1862, the Confederate position at Columbus was seen as indefensible—especially after an epidemic

all but wiped out the garrison at Camp Beauregard—and the fortifications were abandoned at the very end of February. When Union forces arrived to attack the fort on March 1 they found it abandoned and occupied it without a struggle. The “Gibraltar of the West” fell without a struggle or the loss of a single life. For the rest of the war it was used as a Union garrison in the very pro-Confederate Purchase region of Kentucky. During this period of occupation, it was a gathering point for African-Americans fleeing slavery, known at the time as “contrabands,” and a major recruiting point for African-American troops, some of whom garrisoned the site. Columbus was second only to Camp Nelson as a recruiting site for African-American troops in Kentucky. There are many Civil War stories that can be effectively told at Columbus.

Shortly after the war the fort was abandoned and allowed to return to its natural state—earthworks eroded, trees and other vegetation grew up, and the river shifted (unfortunately for its preservation, the fort is on the cutbank side of the river). Massive flooding in 1927 led to the relocation of the community of Columbus and the loss of nearly every antebellum building—one exception being a small frame house on the bluff used as a hospital after the battle. In 1934 much, probably most, of the fort became part of the Kentucky State Park system and the Civilian Conservation Corps “restored” the surviving earth-

works and made other improvements to the park.

In 1994, I was invited to serve on a task force on the future of Columbus-Belmont State Park, being in the midst of a survey of Civil War sites in the Purchase region at the time. As I sat in the task force meetings, several ideas emerged about how our public history program at Murray State could become involved, and our direct involvement began to develop.

In the fall of 1994 my museum studies course used the park as a laboratory. One group took up the redesign of the small museum in the park; another developed an interpretive program for the earthworks. Working with the existing collection and space, applying what they were learning in the course, the museum group developed a 96-page report that got down to the level of how many 2x4s would be needed for the panels. The earthworks group took a more general approach, but had several ideas that we have subsequently developed—restoring a portion, at least, of the earthworks to an appearance closer to that when they were in use (also an idea from the task force, but not something I shared with the students), and stationing costumed interpreters in the earthworks area.

These reports were given to the Kentucky Parks Department and the task force. We then obtained a grant from the Kentucky Humanities Council (with additional funding from the Parks Department) to develop characters for a first-person in-

terpretation program that would use Murray State graduate students and summer youth program participants from Hickman County for implementation.

For a year (June 1 to May 30) two graduate students (Chamonie Miller and Robyn Warren) worked on the development of these characters. When we began we had several types in mind—a Confederate and a Union soldier, male and female slaves, townsmen and women, and an African-American soldier. In the course of our research we added another type: an observer of the battle. We researched various accounts of the Battle of Belmont with special attention to primary sources—first-person accounts—and other materials by people who were in Columbus during the war.

We ended up developing four characters: Sallie Law, an upper-class woman from Memphis, who observed the Battle of Belmont from a riverboat and went ashore to help care for wounded soldiers; Robert Hancock Wood, a Confederate captain from Bolivar, Tennessee, who fought in the battle; William, Wood's personal slave servant who accompanied him to Columbus; and Chauncey Cooke, a sixteen-year-old Union private from Wisconsin who served on garrison duty in Columbus.

While we were developing the characters two things happened that affected the project: a team of Americorps volunteers restored a section of the earthworks by removing the

vegetation that had grown up over the years, and Congress played with the federal budget. The first of these developments was positive: we had an excellent setting for our military characters. The second was very damaging: Hickman County was cut from fifty-plus summer youth workers to four. We were not going to be able to implement our program as we had intended. We did not give up, but after some consideration presented three of the characters during the 1996 Civil War Days at Columbus-Belmont State Park. Two undergraduate students and one alumnus from our Master's program interpreted Sallie Law, Chauncey Cooke, and Robert Hancock Wood. They used the background and archival material we had collected and each created a character. They each prepared a short monologue, or soliloquy, for the opening ceremony of the event, and a number of other stories and background information so that they could meet and interact with visitors on Saturday for a six-hour period when walking tours of the park were offered. Each character had a station appropriate to his or her story where he or she met groups and casual visitors throughout the day. Visitor reaction was overwhelmingly positive, as was that of event organizers. What was a vague idea to many because they had no experience with first-person interpretation became clear, and they got excited. The program was repeated in 1997, and we continue to work with park manage-

ment to make it a regular part of the park's program.

The Battle of Sacramento and the Civil War in McLean County

Our second large-scale interpretation project is in McLean County. It begins from a different point—there is no park or publicly owned site, yet, in the county—and has focused on developing two driving tours, one related to the Battle of Sacramento, the other to the Civil War on the county generally. Joe Brent of the Kentucky Heritage Council and I met with County Judge-Executive Larry Whittaker about Civil War sites in the county and how they might be interpreted and developed as part of an effort to increase tourism and local awareness of the history of the county. We agreed to focus on a National Register nomination for the battlefield at Sacramento, if the site could be identified precisely enough and had sufficient “integrity,” and two driving tours.

Civil War events in McLean County, particularly the Battle of Sacramento, are related to those in Columbus, but that has not been a factor in our involvement. When Leonidas Polk occupied Columbus, the CSA established a defense line across southern Kentucky from Columbus through Bowling Green to the Cumberland Gap, with a small jog down into Tennessee for Forts Henry and Donelson, of course. In preparing to defend Bowling Green, Confederate forces seized Lock and Dams 3 and 4

on the Green River and heavily damaged Number 3 to prevent Union forces from using the river to attack their position in what became the Confederate capital of Kentucky. The Union responded quickly, sending 10,000 troops to occupy Calhoun under General Thomas L. Crittenden and protect Lock and Dam Number 2, which was across the river at Rumsey. This all took place in September and October 1861. The Green River, which flows through McLean County became strategically important to both sides and a focal point for large numbers of troops.

Both sides patrolled the territory between Bowling Green and Calhoun to keep an eye on one another's movements. In December, at Sacramento, about ten miles south of Calhoun, a Union scouting patrol, about 180 men, under eighteen-year-old Union Major Eli Murray was surprised by a Confederate patrol of about 300 led by Nathan Bedford Forrest. The engagement that followed ranged over several miles as the Confederates first attacked and then pursued the withdrawing Union troops part way back to Calhoun—but not so close as to encounter the large relief party Crittenden dispatched.

The Battle at Sacramento was not a major engagement; no more than 500 men were involved on both sides. It is, however, very representative of the small, random skirmishes between patrolling forces that characterize most of the military action in

western Kentucky. It is also important for several other reasons, but primarily as Forrest's first combat action. At Sacramento he displays many of the tactics and traits that produced the success he enjoyed throughout the war and which became the basis for his enduring popularity in western Kentucky and Tennessee.

Our project had two components: first, to nominate the battlefield at Sacramento to the National Register of Historic Places; and second, to develop driving tours that would explain the battle to visitors and would develop the impact of the war on a rural county in western Kentucky. The nomination work gave us a solid research base for the driving tours. What happened, where did it happen, what stories are associated with particular sites, what documentation exists for all of this?

Simultaneously, a community group developed a program to hold a re-enactment at the battlefield which has greatly increased interest and awareness of the county's Civil War history. Efforts are now underway to purchase the core of the battlefield and preserve and interpret it. In the interim, it is protected by formal agreements that prevent development.

I was assisted on this project by Jarrod Smith, then a graduate student at Murray State, who did most of the research and met with many local historians to identify sites. The battle tour (or, as we sometimes refer to it, the "red tour" because we used red

dots to mark the sites on the country road map while we were developing it), has ten sites and can be begun from either Greenville, the seat of neighboring Muhlenberg County, or Calhoun, the seat of McLean County. Forrest assembled his troops at the courthouse in Greenville the morning of the skirmish and proceeded toward Sacramento. We have identified several sites where he met with scouts and a remarkable young woman, Molly Morehead, who warned him of the exact location of Union troops. The tour also includes Garsts Pond where the first shots were exchanged (Forrest himself fired the first shot), the battlefield, and several sites along the route the engagement followed as Union troops withdrew. Finally it reaches Calhoun, where it includes the Lock and Dam and Crittenden's headquarters. The tour brochure (and, later, the signs we are developing to install along the route) will not only explain what happened but why it is significant.

The second tour follows a similar approach with less thematic unity. It includes a number of cemeteries, using graves and tombstones to focus on themes important to the Civil War and to McLean County: the Orphan Brigade, family division (e.g., the Hackett family cemetery in Livermore with Union and Confederate veterans from the family buried at opposite sides from one another), four African-American veterans, etc. It also includes the site of a Union recruiting and training camp; the home of Sue

Monday, a guerrilla executed late in the War; and the site of the Battle of Panther Creek, just over the county line in Daviess County. The main focus is on the extent to which the war permeated the experience of people in a rural county.

The battle tour has been implemented—without full roadside signs until they can be funded—and the second will be in place shortly. The re-enactment of the skirmish at Sacramento is now an annual event in May, and we see the driving tours expanding the impact of this one-weekend-a-year event throughout the year. When we started, McLean County was 120th in tourism activity out of the 120 counties in Kentucky. It is on the rise.

Conclusion

In both projects we had several goals. One has been and continues to be to give students first-hand experience in public history by working on real projects with real people. A second has been to provide a service to communities and organizations within Murray State University's service area. Third, each project has had specific, local goals: to enrich the interpretation program at Columbus-Belmont, to increase awareness of

history in McLean County, and, in both projects, to attract additional visitors.

In both we have benefited from those we have partnered with. In Columbus, Hickman County Judge-Executive Greg Pruitt has been a constant supporter who has welcomed our involvement, as have Ed Henson and Brooks Howard of the Kentucky Parks Department in Frankfort and Park Manager Bill Stevens. We have also had grant support from the Kentucky Humanities Council and the Parks Department to cover the costs involved. In McLean County, Judge-Executive Larry Whitaker has been the catalyst and driving force behind the project, incorporating history into the county's plans for development in a very basic and fundamental way. His support, that of the fiscal court, and a grant from the Kentucky Heritage Council to the fiscal court have made this possible. The project has been picked up by the local camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, led by Fred Wilhite. In this we have succeeded in building strong partnerships with local support and leadership to ensure the preservation and interpretation of important resources.

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